

1-1-2001

## **Evangelical Christianity and the appeal of the middle Ages: The case of Bishop Charles Venn Pilcher**

Graham Barwell

*University of Wollongong*, gbarwell@uow.edu.au

John Kennedy

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers>



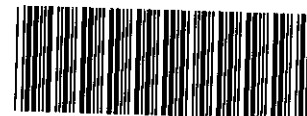
Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Barwell, Graham and Kennedy, John, Evangelical Christianity and the appeal of the middle Ages: The case of Bishop Charles Venn Pilcher 2001, 37-55.  
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers/519>

Copyright of Full Text rests with the original copyright owner and, except as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, copying this copyright material is prohibited without the permission of the owner or its exclusive licensee or agent or by way of a licence from Copyright Agency Limited. For information about such licences contact Copyright Agency Limited on (02) 93947600 (ph) or (02) 93947601 (fax)



200401400

## Evangelical Christianity and the Appeal of the Middle Ages: The Case of Bishop Charles Venn Pilcher

Graham Barwell and John Kennedy

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years in studies of the Western Middle Ages, there has been an increasing interest in medievalism itself, rather than simply in the cultures and their cultural products.<sup>1</sup> Such interest has not been confined to the European countries, but has extended to others, the United States or Australia, for example, where the teaching of medieval studies has often been based on a sense of a European cultural inheritance. As part of this shift in direction, specific attention has been paid to the medievalism of a variety of enthusiasts, editors, translators, teachers and scholars. Some of the focus has been on the role medievalism played in the formation of subjects and cultures, especially in the formation of gender

<sup>1</sup> This interest is demonstrated in the periodical, *Studies in Medievalism*, which began publication in 1979. Several notable monographs relevant to nineteenth-century Britain have appeared since then. Mark Girouard's *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), for instance, focusses on the revival and adaptation of the code of medieval chivalry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Andrew Wawn's *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000) shows how Norse medievalism permeated almost all literate sections of Victorian society.

and identity – personal, class or national – and in the production and legitimization of socio-political forces like nationalism or colonialism/imperialism.<sup>2</sup> In the United Kingdom, for instance, the great cultural value placed on a perceived connection with the Middle Ages can be seen in many features of nineteenth-century literary culture, from children's books, especially those for boys, to the output of groups like the Early English Text Society,<sup>3</sup> itself an offshoot of the immense interest in language history which resulted in the production of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

While major figures have had most of the attention,<sup>4</sup> nineteenth-century medievalism affected some quite minor cultural figures and an examination of those effects is not unrewarding. It can help to account for some otherwise puzzling features of the life and work of such people, and can throw some light on why certain attitudes might have been held. In Australia, one such figure is the clergyman and scholar, Charles Venn Pilcher (1879–1961), one time Coadjutor Bishop of Sydney and publisher of the first book of translations from the Icelandic in this country.

Pilcher was not a professional medievalist: ordained in the Anglican church and deeply rooted in the Evangelical tradition, he professed theology as his discipline and specialised for most of his long academic career in the study of the Old and New Testaments, publishing quite extensively in those fields. Yet during some 30 years he also devoted much time and energy to studying and translating medieval literature, particularly that of Iceland.

- 2 Chapter 14, 'Knights of the Empire' (pp. 219–30) in Girouard's book examines the links between medievalism and British imperialism, while the collection of essays edited by Donald E. Hall, *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), critiques this important Victorian religious, social and literary movement from the point of view of cultural and gender studies. Girouard's chapter on the Christian Socialist movement, 'Muscular Chivalry' (pp. 129–44), focussing especially on Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes, shows the close connection between it and Victorian medievalism.
- 3 The work of the author, R. M. Ballantyne, is briefly discussed below. F. J. Furnivall, the founder of the text society, taught at the Working Men's College, the institution associated with the Christian Socialists (Girouard, *The Return to Camelot*, p. 136).
- 4 See, for example, the studies of Sir Walter Scott and Sir Frederic Madden by David Matthews, "'Quaint Inglis': Walter Scott and the Rise of Middle English Studies', *Studies in Medievalism* 7 (1995), 33–48 and "'The Deadly Poison of Democracy': Sir Frederic, Sir Gawain, and the Invention of Middle English', *Parergon* NS 15.2 (Jan. 1998), 19–45.

Why did Pilcher turn so consistently to the Middle Ages? It may not be unusual for an academic to have an intellectual hobby distinct from his or her primary discipline, and perhaps there was more scope for this in the first half of the twentieth century than in the more pressured circumstances of today. He did have other interests: he led a busy life as a practising clergyman, a musician (apart from a very active interest in church music he played bass clarinet in the Toronto Symphony Orchestra for ten years!), and as a social activist. This pattern did not alter with his movement in 1936 from Canada to the diocese of Sydney: in fact, much of the 20 years until his retirement in 1956 saw him combining scholarly activities in the theological and Old Norse fields with a steady round of episcopal duties and a very active public role, particularly as a supporter of Jewish causes and the state of Israel. This was despite the fact that in moving to Sydney he had considerably complicated the task of pursuing his Norse studies, since no Australian library at that time possessed anything resembling an adequate collection in the field, and the difficulties in obtaining texts and secondary material from overseas were immense. The persistence of his studies indicates that for him the Middle Ages represented more than the innocent pastime of an idle hour, and this paper will explore Pilcher's work in the medieval field with a view to suggesting that it was driven by the close association he saw between the ethics and values of medieval Icelandic literature and the Evangelical Christianity which lay at the core of his life and work. We argue that in this respect Pilcher shows how deeply nineteenth-century medievalism, which had strong links with Kingsley's notion of muscular Christianity, could affect someone who was not primarily a medievalist.

#### PILCHER'S LIFE<sup>5</sup>

Charles Venn Pilcher was born in Oxford, the son of an Anglican clergyman and a devout mother, Mary Elliott, who was a descendent of both Henry Venn, one of the leaders of the eighteenth-century Evangelical revival, and Charles Elliott,

5 Biographical information on Pilcher is largely drawn from Maurice Laserson, *Bishop Charles Venn Pilcher D.D.: A Biographical Study* (Sydney, 1949). See also the references cited in the present writers' 'Charles Venn Pilcher: Bishop Coadjutor of Sydney and Translator from the Icelandic', in *Old Norse Studies in the New World: A Collection of Essays to Celebrate the Jubilee of the Teaching of Old Norse at the University of Sydney 1943-1993*, ed. Geraldine Barnes et al. (Sydney: Department of English, University of Sydney, 1994), pp. 33-45.

one of the founders of the Church Missionary Society. He was educated at Charterhouse School in the 1890s and at Hertford College, Oxford from 1898 to 1903, before proceeding to Anglican ordination. In his early years he thus experienced a style of life probably fairly typical of studious boys from solid middle-class backgrounds in a period when pride in Britain's achievements, especially its great empire, was reaching new heights and when the nineteenth-century revival of chivalry and the cult of muscular Christianity, which in some respects stemmed from it, were vital forces in middle and upper class education.<sup>6</sup> It will be seen that Pilcher was not unaffected by these forces which appear to have easily melded for him with the Evangelism of his family background. In one respect the young Pilcher was atypical of his class: his father, Francis, had been born in New South Wales and had lived there until entering Oxford University in 1859. But it is very doubtful that this made his son feel any less British. Until the second half of the twentieth century most Australians from middle-class Protestant backgrounds seem to have been proud to regard themselves as British (as indeed they were in law) and to count themselves as full sharers in the traditions and achievements of the 'Mother Country' they often called simply 'Home'.

Possibly his father's colonial origins made Pilcher a little more ready to move to another part of the Empire, Canada, in 1906, after a short period as the domestic chaplain to the Bishop of Durham. But a career move to a British territory overseas was scarcely an extraordinary step for a young Englishman of his class at that time, even if it was to be lifelong. Although he was not administering the legal, political or commercial enterprises of the Empire, or even prosletysing as a missionary, the choice of his first position indicates the natural attraction an institution with a renowned Evangelical emphasis had for him. This was Wycliffe College in the University of Toronto, where he taught theological subjects for most of his thirty years in Canada.

During this time he published in theology and produced a number of works relating to Iceland, his childhood interest in which had been heightened by contact with the Icelandic community in Canada. A particular interest was the great Lutheran priest poet Hallgrímur Pétursson (1614–1674), one of the major figures

6 The period of Pilcher's education followed immediately after the flowering of the doctrine of Imperialism, especially at Oxford, in the 1880s (Girouard, *The Return to Camelot*, pp. 221–22).

in post-medieval Icelandic literature. Hallgrímur's *Passion Hymns* dealing with the sufferings and death of Christ were to figure prominently in books of translations Pilcher published in 1913, 1921, 1923, and 1950.<sup>7</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s Pilcher had opportunities to visit many parts of the world, but his visit to Iceland in 1921 seems to have made a particularly deep impression on him.

In 1936 he again indicated the appeal of Evangelical Anglicanism had for him, when he accepted the position of Coadjutor Bishop of the staunchly Evangelical diocese of Sydney, where he was consecrated on 21 May, shortly before his 57th birthday. He was later to summarise his work in the diocese as consisting 'mainly of preaching in the Cathedral Church of St Andrew, in teaching on the staff of Moore College, the Theological College of the Diocese, and in taking my part in the University of Sydney as a member of the Board of Studies for Divinity degrees', adding that he also spent 'a considerable time travelling over the diocese in order to take Confirmations'.<sup>8</sup> But his life, at least in the 1940s, was more eventful than this implies. His sense of Christian duty, especially to fellow Europeans, led him to become an active champion of Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe and a vigorous supporter both of a wartime campaign to establish a Jewish colony in northern Australia and of the postwar state of Israel. Ironically, he also found himself in the early 1940s under official suspicion for allegedly pro-German sympathies. The security service officers charged with investigating him eventually concluded that he was in no way disloyal. But though he abhorred the excesses of the Third Reich, Pilcher's empathy with the German people was real, and had led him in 1938 to urge the return of New Guinea to the control of its former colonial master, Germany, as a means of securing for Australia the potential 'help of a people kindred in blood, language, art, and ideals'.<sup>9</sup> In keeping with the prevailing cultural attitudes of his

7. *The Passion-Hymns of Iceland: Being Translations from the Passion-Hymns of Hallgrím Petursson and from the Hymns of the Modern Icelandic Hymn Book* (London: Robert Scott, 1913); *Meditations on the Cross from Iceland's Poet of the Passion* (Toronto: Upper Canada Tract Society, [1921]); *Icelandic Meditations on the Passion: Being Selections from the Passion-Hymns of Hallgrím Petursson Translated from the Icelandic and Arranged as a Series of Meditations for Each Day of the Month* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1923); *Icelandic Christian Classics: The Lay of the Sun, The Lily, The Passion-Hymns, The Millennial Hymn* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1950).

8. Laserson, *Bishop Charles Venn Pilcher D.D.*, p. [5].

9. *Launceston Examiner*, 17 February 1938, p. 6; Rodney Gouttman, 'The Pilcher Conundrum', *Journal of the Australian Jewish Historical Society*, 11.1 (1990), 80.

upbringing, he made little acknowledgement in his social activism of the interests of the indigenous inhabitants of either Australia or New Guinea.

In the later 1940s and early 1950s Bishop Pilcher seems to have been able to devote more time to his Icelandic interests, which the Government of Iceland recognised in 1954 by making him a Knight Commander of the Icelandic Order of the Falcon. He died in Sydney in 1961 after a period of illness.

#### PILCHER AS MEDIEVALIST

Though Iceland was by far the most important focus for Pilcher's interest in the Middle Ages, he was, unsurprisingly for someone holding the position of Recognised Lecturer on Church History in the University of Sydney between 1938 and 1944, well aware of the medieval church in his British homeland. He saw it as being intimately connected with the Anglican church of the present and responded particularly strongly to the motif of heroic suffering, which had always been an important part of some of the traditional tales of medieval English Christianity. Looking back on his life in a work published in 1949, he noted that during his time in Durham he had been 'living in those northern counties which had witnessed the conversion of our Anglo-Saxon fore-fathers in the golden dawn of English Christianity',<sup>10</sup> and in 1936 he wrote 13 of a series of 22 scenes for an *Anglican Historical Pageant* held to commemorate the centenary of the consecration of Australia's first bishop. Nine of the 13 related to the period 500–1500: 'Gregory the Great and the Angle Slaves', 'The Preaching of S. Augustine before King Ethelbert', 'Caedmon in the Stable and before St [sic] Hilda', 'The Venerable Bede', 'The Martyrdom of S. Alphege', 'The Coronation of the Conqueror' [i.e., William I], 'The Murder of S. Thomas à Becket', 'Richard Coeur de Lion', and 'Wycliffe Sending Forth his Preachers'. A particular focus of Pilcher's contribution was Archbishops of Canterbury who could be regarded as martyrs: apart from Alphege and Becket, Cramner and Laud received scenes, and the four were linked by the Lector's commentary and by a 'Splendid Pain' musical motif which in the performances was established in an anonymously written introduction with the refrain:

10 Laserson, *Bishop Charles Venn Pilcher D.D.*, p. [3].

Age after age the Pilgrim Church hath trod  
The path of splendid pain that leads to God.<sup>11</sup>

The celebration of four such disparate bishops in the pageant suggests a rather broadminded religious attitude for the time; and in the words he wrote for the Lector, Pilcher alludes to the 'golden age of Monasticism' and the 'golden age of Medieval Catholicism' in the thirteenth century, whilst also referring to the 'degenerate days' of the fourteenth-century Papacy and celebrating the achievement of the English Reformation.<sup>12</sup> The way in which Pilcher was able to appropriate the Catholicism of the medieval English church was to be paralleled in his treatment of the Icelandic writers he translated and in his assertion of a real kinship with medieval Icelanders. In this latter respect, he was following a well-established path for northern Europeans of various nationalities, as the glories of medieval Icelandic culture, especially the literature, were often treated, usually unproblematically, as part of the cultural inheritance of each nation.

Pilcher's major achievement in the medieval field was to be his translations of four long Icelandic poems, but these were by no means the only medieval Icelandic projects he contemplated. His thesis for the degree of doctor of divinity, awarded to him by the University of Oxford in 1921, was entitled 'The Christian Doctrine of Resurrection' but included a section on the eschatology of the Old Norse pagan religion; and for some years in the 1920s he seems to have been impelled by a remarkably strong desire to find a further Norse topic on which to work, trying out various possibilities.

Correspondence from Pilcher to Professor Halldór Hermannsson, Curator of the Fiske Icelandic Collection at Cornell University, documents this search which, one suspects, must at times have sorely tested the patience of the indefatigably productive Icelandic scholar to whom the letters and notes were addressed.<sup>13</sup> On 10 January 1923 Halldór's help was sought in regard to a

11 The couplet is reproduced on the cover of the pamphlet providing the text of the pageant, and on the verso of the title page. See Charles V. Pilcher and S. M. Johnstone, *Anglican Historical Pageant Held in Commemoration of the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Consecration of Australia's First Bishop, 1836-1936, Town Hall, Sydney, June 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 1936* (Sydney, 1936).

12 *Anglican Historical Pageant*, pp. 12 and 16.

13 Quotations from this correspondence are reproduced here courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. The authors are grateful to Patrick J. Stevens for his help in providing access to this material.



proposed 'history of Christianity in the Scandinavian Countries' – the questions asked and the observation 'I hope to tackle the Reformation and Modern Periods later' reveal the initial emphasis of Pilcher's work was to be on medieval Scandinavian Christianity. A note of 19 January 1923 thanked Halldór for his 'very full and most helpful reply', but on 14 November that year Pilcher wrote: 'I am still searching for a definite field. A History of Scandinavian Christianity is, I am sure, too wide. I must confine myself to a definite aspect or period of it.'

A letter of 14 May 1924 thanked Halldór for his suggestion that Pilcher concentrate on Icelandic church history from 1000 to 1500, but confided: 'I ... am beginning to feel that my style is more suited for a series of brief biographical studies'. He also expressed doubts that anyone would buy a 'formal history'. Two months later, however, on 10 June, the mood was quite different. Informed by Pilcher of Halldór's suggestion, William Craigie, 'the Oxford Icelandic Scholar', had expressed confidence that the work would find a publisher and had promised to use his influence with the Clarendon Press. Enthused afresh, Pilcher asked for the loan of books and sought advice:

My idea, and Dr Craigie's, is for a book of somewhat over 300 pages; dealing with different aspects of the Church Life – Monasticism, Religious Poetry etc and reducing the annalistic dry bones to a minimum – endeavouring to paint a living picture of the whole process, and only giving details of the more striking lives and saints.

The enthusiasm continued in a letter of 11 July 1924 – 'I want to make the thing not dry annals, but a living study' – but may have been flagging when he wrote again on 10 September, seeking more books but confessing that his energies had been diverted into other projects and wondering if a new history of the Icelandic church 1000–1500 by Bishop Jón Helgason left room for his own proposed work. (He was presumably referring to *Kristnisaga Íslands frá öndverðu til vorra tíma*, the first volume of which was published in Reykjavík in 1925, or to Jón's *Íslands Kirke fra dens Grundlæggelse til Reformationen*, published in Copenhagen in 1925.) The last mention of the project in the Cornell letters is dated 31 December 1924:

I have begun to wonder whether it is possible to write a history of Icelandic Xtianity [*sic*] which would interest English readers. The elements which make a popular appeal are so largely lacking. I wonder if a series of studies in Icelandic literature would hold more promise? One would have a large field for description and interpretative essays.

But this was not the end of Pilcher's attempts to obtain guidance and the loan of books from Halldór. On 27 April 1927 he sought advice on a quite different project, though again one which would involve popularising medieval Iceland:

I see that you wish that Saga translations could be made into other languages like those of the German series called 'Thule'. Are there any worth while [*sic*] sagas not yet translated into English? If there are I should like sometime to have a try at one myself. I should be very grateful if you tell me of any such. Would the 'Viking Society' undertake publication?

Pilcher was not destined to join the ranks of Icelandic saga translators, and his only work dealing with the secular literature of medieval Iceland is a short essay on the heroic ideal in Icelandic literature, published in the 1936 yearbook of a Lutheran foundation in Winnipeg.<sup>14</sup> Though clearly a rather 'lightweight' popular piece rather than a scholarly study, this is quite revealing as to why Pilcher admired Old Icelandic literature and wished others to admire, and we will need to return to it.

Only two of Pilcher's four translations of Old Norse poems were conventionally printed during his lifetime. In 1924 a Canadian religious journal published 'An Icelandic Divine Comedy',<sup>15</sup> his version of *Sólarljóð*, an anonymous work now usually dated to the thirteenth century. This translation was to be reprinted, essentially unaltered, twice: in 1940 as a somewhat surprising appendix to Pilcher's *The Hereafter in Jewish and Christian Thought*,<sup>16</sup> a volume of lectures which otherwise appears to lack any obvious links to medieval Scandinavia; and, more predictably, in his *Icelandic Christian Classics*, a book of verse translations published in 1950 by Oxford University Press in Melbourne. In the preface to the 1940 work Pilcher states that *Sólarljóð* 'gives a description of Life after Death according to the conceptions of the Christian Middle Ages, but with a distinctively Norse colouring'.<sup>17</sup> In fact his version, which presents only 42 of the original 82 stanzas and concentrates on the death experience and

14 'The Norse Heroic Ideal in Icelandic Literature', in the *Jón Bjarnason Academy Year Book* (1936), pp. 9-17.

15 *Canadian Journal of Religious Thought*, 1.6 (1924), pp. 499-508.

16 *The Hereafter in Jewish and Christian Thought with Special Reference to the Doctrine of Resurrection*, Moorhouse Lectures 1938 (London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge; New York: Macmillan, 1940), pp. 191-204.

17 *The Hereafter*, p. ix.

the 'Vision', omits almost all the material based on Norse mythology, much of which is rather gnomic and now more or less obscure. The resulting translation probably emphasises the parallel with Dante more than would a reading of the original Norse poem, though Pilcher's stanzas attempt to reproduce some features of the original alliterative verse form:

Men saw I then  
 Who by cunning devices  
 Defrauded others of their own.  
 In throngs they marched  
 In the city of Mammon,  
 Loaded with lead.<sup>18</sup>

In a wide-ranging introduction which accompanied all three publications of the translation Pilcher briefly considers the hereafter in the works of Michelangelo, Gregory the Great, the Venerable Bede, and Dante before assessing the significance of *Sólarljóð*.

We could ill have afforded to have lost our poem, for it marks an epoch in the history of Icelandic literature – the moment when the old Teutonic verse-form, just before its death, uttered its swan-song in the precenting of Christian truth. The Eddaic poetry of the heathen days was to yield to a new culture of thought and of expression. The battle between Thor and Christ had been fought, and Christ remained victor. The music which had sounded the strength of Thor was to utter its homage to the Conqueror, and then to cease from the earth.<sup>19</sup>

The metaphor of battle, the imperialist triumph of the true religion and the extinction of a superceded paganism are characteristic of the kind of nineteenth-century Christianity Pilcher had absorbed as part of his upbringing. His ensuing discussion of *Hávamál* and *Völuspá* serves to illustrate the claim that 'the rugged forcefulness of the Edda was a trophy worthy of the Christian spirit'. But *Sólarljóð*, the work which 'baptizes this old poetry into Christ', is not immune from the shortcomings of medieval Catholicism:

18 *Icelandic Christian Classics*, p. 12. Quotations from Pilcher's versions of *Sólarljóð* and *Lilja*, and from his observations about these two poems, are drawn from this volume.

19 *Icelandic Christian Classics*, p. 2.

Its subject-matter indeed is the normal thought-material of the mediaeval Church. Written by a 'clerk', possibly by a monk in some lonely monastery on the shores of an Arctic sea, some time in the thirteenth century, the kernel of the poem takes the form of an admonition, delivered in vision, by a dead father to his son. After a description of the pangs of death he paints the horrors of hell and the joys of heaven. The horrors are horrors indeed. He has seen men with their hands nailed to red-hot stones. On the other hand, he can think of nothing more adequate for the joys of heaven than to sit and listen to holy books and hymns read by angels. That is the mediaeval expectation, and it is scarcely satisfying to us who demand life, and life more abundant.<sup>20</sup>

However, Pilcher has no misgivings as to the poem's artistry: 'how arresting is the Icelandic treatment! How strong the short, crisp sentences!'

The second of Pilcher's translations of Old Icelandic poems to appear in print was his version of *Lilja* ('Lily'), published 1950 in *Icelandic Christian Classics*. In his introduction he describes *Lilja* as, 'from certain points of view, the most remarkable poem which Iceland has produced' and declares that it is 'the classic' of the nation's pre-Reformation Christian poetry.<sup>21</sup> In doing so he is following accepted Icelandic opinion, which has held the poem of one hundred eight line stanzas (or, for a time, a version expurgated to suit Lutheran tastes) in high esteem ever since its composition in the mid-fifteenth century by Eysteinn Asgrimsson.

Like the Englishman Thomas Malory in the following century, Eysteinn has a reputation as both a great writer and a man of a rather quarrelsome and violent disposition (though, as in Malory's case, there has been some uncertainty as to whether the writer and lawbreaker were indeed the same person).<sup>22</sup> Pilcher refers to a 'legend' that Eysteinn wrote his poem in prison, and was miraculously raised one foot out of a hundred foot deep pit for every stanza completed.<sup>23</sup> A somewhat boastful

20 *Icelandic Christian Classics*, pp. 4-5.

21 *Icelandic Christian Classics*, pp. 16 and 20.

22 See Stéfan Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1957), pp. 74-75. The most recent major study of Malory, P. J. C. Field's *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1993), argues strongly that the writer and lawbreaker were the same person, Sir Thomas Malory (c. 1416-71) of Newbold Revel, Warwickshire.

23 *Icelandic Christian Classics*, pp. 16-17.

note at the beginning of the 23rd stanza caused him to descend again to the bottom, but a more penitent tone in the second half led to his being replaced 23 feet up:

Kindled be my tongue with beauty,  
Of the Lord to tell the praises,  
Mighty works of Him to utter  
Who the three-fold world embraces.  
Wounded, bent, had'st thou been lying  
Bound in curse of lowest devil,  
Had not God's most kind salvation  
Come to earth and loosed the prisoner.<sup>24</sup>

The subject matter of *Lilja* is sacred history, from the fall of the angels and the creation of the world, through the life of Christ, and on to the final judgement of humanity. Pilcher sees it as having 'baptized the court poetry [i.e., skaldic verse]' into Christ,<sup>25</sup> and thus performing an analogous function to that of *Sólarljóð* in regard to Eddaic poetry, the other great category of Old Icelandic verse. But though he greatly admires the literary achievement of *Lilja* – 'perhaps, the greatest mediaeval religious classic of the whole of the north of Europe' – translates it in its entirety, and declares that its 'central theme ... is the battle fought by God for man's soul', he is concerned by the role it gives to the Virgin Mary, noting that the medieval 'Cult of the Virgin' was 'essentially unchristian' and stating that *Lilja* gives Mary 'a far higher and more prominent place than is justified by the teaching of the New Testament'.<sup>26</sup> He unfavourably contrasts Eysteinn's religion with that of the Lutheran Hallgrímur Pétursson:

Eysteinn may claim to be the greater poet, but Hallgrímur surpasses in spiritual power. It is true that Eysteinn, like Hallgrímur, sang the Passion of the Lord. But Eysteinn seems never entirely able to roll the burden of his sin upon Christ and leave it at the foot of the Cross. So he places some of his confidence elsewhere. Above all, as was the mediaeval manner, he asks for the intercession of the Virgin Mother with her Son. ... Thus he lacks the triumphant and scriptural confidence of Hallgrímur, whose utter trust is laid on Jesus only.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Icelandic Christian Classics*, p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> *Icelandic Christian Classics*, p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> *Icelandic Christian Classics*, pp. 19–20.

<sup>27</sup> *Icelandic Christian Classics*, pp. 47–48.

Such sentiments make it seem at first glance rather surprising that about four years later Bishop Pilcher distributed mimeographed copies of his complete translation of the 47 stanza poem, *Pislargrátr* ('Passion Lament'),<sup>28</sup> generally attributed to Bishop Jón Arason (1484–1550), the last Catholic bishop in Iceland before the twentieth century, someone often regarded as 'a martyr to his faith'.<sup>29</sup> Pilcher was probably aware that his choice might seem curious for an Evangelical Protestant bishop. In the preliminary material accompanying the translation he quotes Icelandic scholars who rank Jón high as a poet and a man of religious feeling, and he presents him as someone 'who gave his life for the freedom of his country, fighting against the encroachments of the Danish King':<sup>30</sup>

As the last Bishop of the Medieval Church in Iceland he naturally opposed the introduction of the Reformation. He did this, however, not only for religious reasons, but also because the new interpretation of Christianity was being forced upon the people by the Danish King in a manner which violated the laws of the Icelandic Constitution. Hence he came to be regarded as the great champion of the freedom of his people.<sup>31</sup>

Bishop Jón, he seems to be suggesting, can be regarded as virtually a man of the Reformation in spite of himself. He quotes approvingly the view of Professor Magnús Jónsson that 'No one can doubt that had Jon Arason lived a generation or two later he would have championed the New Teaching with the same heroism with which he opposed it'.<sup>32</sup> In Pilcher's own view he composed in *Pislargrátr* 'a poem on the Passion almost every sentence of which could have been signed by Martin Luther himself', a work which 'prepared the way for the Passion-

28 'The Passion-Lament of Bishop Jon Arason', translated by Charles Venn Pilcher (typescript, Moore Theological College Library, Sydney, 1953). For the date see Heinrich Beck, *Útverðir íslenzkrar menningar* (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1972), p. 162.

29 Stéfan Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature*, p. 82. Though Pilcher seems to have been unaware of it, there is room for uncertainty as to whether Bishop Jón actually wrote the poem – see Böðvar Guðmundsson et al., *Íslensk bókmenntasaga*, 2 (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1993), p. 305.

30 'Passion-Lament', p. [i].

31 'Passion-Lament', p. 1. See also the present writers' edition of Pilcher's translations of *Liknarbraut* and *Pislargrátr*, 'Two Icelandic Medieval Passion-Poems,' in *Old Norse Studies in the New World*, p. 48.

32 'Passion-Lament', p. 1. The comment was translated by Pilcher from *Kirkjuritið* (1950), p. 293.

Hymns of Hallgrím Petursson' about a century later.<sup>33</sup> It is 'perhaps most remarkable for the solemn statement of the Refrain', a half stanza used six times by Jón and clearly congenial to Pilcher:

Mighty in abundant mercy  
Is the shining Passion of Jesus.  
He, who on that death relieth,  
Finds Heaven's way to God's forgiveness.<sup>34</sup>

In the introduction to the mimeographed *Píslargrátr* translation Pilcher briefly discusses two other medieval Icelandic treatments of the Passion, *Harmsól* ('Sorrow's Sun') and *Liknarbraut* ('Mercy's Way'), which he dates there to about 1200 and about 1250 respectively. A complete handwritten version of *Liknarbraut*, a poem of 52 eight line stanzas, is extant among Pilcher's papers preserved at Moore Theological College, with a foreword indicating that he intended to publish it along with his version of *Píslargrátr*.<sup>35</sup> His comments on *Liknarbraut* in this source and in the introduction to the mimeographed version of *Píslargrátr* reveal that Pilcher admired it for the religious feeling in its treatment of the Passion of Christ and for its poet's 'powerful and impressive [language]. He not only saw, he heard the Crucifixion'.<sup>36</sup> He traces the Christian antecedents of the poem and suggests possible influences on it, including the work of St Bonaventure (died 1274) and John Peckham, Archbishop of Canterbury (died 1292).<sup>37</sup> But Pilcher also notes the debt to the traditions of Norse skaldic verse, and attempts to translate the kennings, 'in order to preserve the Old Icelandic flavour',<sup>38</sup> though he is rather unsympathetic:

The poet has not broken away from the skaldic custom of the frequent use of 'kennings'. These were poetical circumlocutions. Thus God is called 'Monarch of the shining sky-tent'. The author of *Lilja* was the first to break away from this unnecessary usage.<sup>39</sup>

33 'Passion-Lament', pp. 5 and 2.

34 'Passion-Lament', p. 5.

35 The foreword to this work suggests that *Liknarbraut* was written 'probably in the latter half of the thirteenth century' ('Two Icelandic Medieval Passion-Poems', p. 47).

36 'Passion-Lament', p. 3.

37 'Two Icelandic Medieval Passion-Poems', p. 47.

38 'Two Icelandic Medieval Passion-Poems', p. 47.

39 'Passion-Lament', p. 3.

Nevertheless the poem is 'an impassioned appeal to men to "have always the eyes of the mind towards Jesus crucified"':<sup>40</sup>

Let us, brethren, ever  
Keep such mighty suffering  
In our hearts with weeping.<sup>41</sup>

and in this 'We are reminded of the call of Hallgrímur Pétursson, Iceland's great poet [of] the Passion, some 400 years later'.<sup>42</sup>

#### THE APPEAL OF THE MIDDLE AGES

Pilcher clearly devoted considerable time and effort in the course of a busy life to studying the Icelandic Middle Ages and popularising their literature as a translator. An obvious question is why he did so.

A common reason for interest in Iceland in English-speaking countries during Pilcher's lifetime was of course the notion that the Icelanders, the 'children of the Vikings', were fellow Teutons, close racial cousins of the Anglo-Saxons, and that the stock from which they sprang had contributed to the creation of the British Empire and the United States by their settling in England in considerable numbers about a thousand years earlier and bringing with them a hardy, energetic spirit and a vigorous love of liberty. R. M. Ballantyne, the noted author of adventure stories for boys, epitomises this widespread view in the 1869 preface to his *Erling the Bold*:

the spirit of the age, and the germs of the British Constitution – may be traced to the Norsemen of old; those sturdy Vikings or Sea-rovers, who marauded, conquered, and settled in this country at various times between the fifth and eleventh centuries.<sup>43</sup>

Pilcher's 1936 essay on the Norse heroic ideal, mentioned above, makes it clear that he was influenced by this popular idea. Material from the Eddaic poems *Völuspá* and *Hávamál*, and from four of the classical sagas, *Laxdæla saga*, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, and *Brennu-Njáls saga*, is used to illustrate, and to celebrate, an heroic attitude attributed to 'the Norsemen of old':

40 'Two Icelandic Medieval Passion-Poems', p. 47.

41 'Passion-Lament', p. 4.

42 'Two Icelandic Medieval Passion-Poems', p. 47.

43 R. M. Ballantyne, *Erling the Bold: A Tale of the Norse Sea-Kings* (London: Nisbet, 1875), p. [iii].



even if spears give quarter, old age does not. In the long run the material forces of the universe will crush the boldest and the bravest and the best. How then may a man conquer in this battle in which his ultimate defeat is inevitable? He may conquer ... by the freedom of his will and by his indomitable spirit which meets the blows of fate, bloody but unbowed. More than this, the completeness of the victory of the human spirit is manifested by the grace, the aesthetic beauty, the gladness with which a man marches to meet his end.<sup>44</sup>

In Pilcher's view the same heroic attitude is seen later in Icelandic history, and in the courage of some German soldiers in World War I, who stood their ground when their Turkish allies fled. This latter instance is a early indication of his acceptance of the notion of Germanic Europe sharing a common heritage, a belief common enough in nineteenth-century England, given impetus by philological study and the inter-relationships of the royal houses, for instance, but which later led to some suspicion of him in wartime Australia. He asserted that the most remarkable statement of that heroic attitude ('to us of British origin a matter of interest') is in the Old English *Battle of Maldon*. But it is absent from the literature and culture of Greece and Rome:

We read in the Iliad (21 136, 137) that, on the approach of Achilles, 'a trembling seized Hector as he was aware of him, nor endured he to abide in his place, but left the gates behind him and fled in fear.' No Viking would have so behaved. However overwhelming the odds he would have stood his ground, at once blithe and grim to the end. The wild North Sea grew a harder breed of men than the smiling Mediterranean.<sup>45</sup>

The final paragraph of the essay implies that this ethos evident in saga-age Iceland was to be celebrated in the twentieth century not merely out of pride in what he called the 'spirit of the Teutonic race'.<sup>46</sup> It could be a source of inspiration to

44 'The Norse Heroic Ideal', pp. 11-12.

45 'The Norse Heroic Ideal', p. 13. It is noteworthy how similar the sentiment of the last sentence is to the notion of physical toughness expressed in this couplet from Charles Kingsley's 'Ode to the North-East Wind': 'Tis the hard grey weather / Breeds hard English men' (*Andromeda and Other Poems* (London, 1858), p. 100).

46 'The Norse Heroic Ideal', p. 12.

Christians, even if its exponents lived in heathen times. The men and women who 'shiningly fulfilled the high demands of the Norse heroic ideal'

were assuredly, in one aspect of their character at least, not far from that kingdom which those alone can enter who obey the stern and challenging condition which make victory the guerdon<sup>47</sup> of suffering, life the issue of death, the crown the fulfillment of the cross.<sup>48</sup>

But though admiration for the Norse heroic ideal played a role in encouraging Pilcher to explore medieval Icelandic literature, the four medieval poems he translated are a long way from being stirring tales of Viking derring-do. Their attraction to Pilcher was not exactly the same as the appeal of the sagas to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century admirers of an heroic Norse past, though it is likely that he too was partly driven by pride in a shared racial heritage.

The four poems are, of course, examples of Christian religious poetry, and thus, one might say, unsurprising subjects for a bishop's attention. But if Pilcher's aim had merely been to bring worthwhile Christian poetry from another tradition before the minds and hearts of English speaking readers, he need scarcely have turned to medieval Iceland. *Icelandic Christian Classics* includes his English versions of vernacular poems by the Danish Lutheran bishop Thomas Kingo (1634–1703) and Sweden's first Lutheran archbishop Laurentius Petri (1529–1579), and Pilcher's publications also demonstrate an ability to translate from German, Russian, Latin, Ancient Greek, and Hebrew, as well as Modern Icelandic.<sup>49</sup> Even had he wished to concentrate on works not readily available in other translations he had at his disposal an immense wealth of Christian literature unaffected by the uncongenial elements of medieval Catholicism which clung to *Sólarljóð* and *Lilja*, and to the religious beliefs of Jón Arason.

His comments as quoted above reveal that the four poems he chose were more than just randomly selected Christian texts of some poetic merit. They were vital links in a chain which joined the vigorous spirit of the old Norsemen to what he saw as the fullness of Christian truth and Christian poetic inspiration in the seventeenth-century works of Hallgrímur Pétursson. *Sólarljóð* and *Lilja*

47 The text as printed reads 'guardian', but this is corrected by hand in the copy amongst Pilcher's papers in the Moore Theological College Library, Sydney.

48 'The Norse Heroic Ideal', p. 17.

49 See Graham Barwell and John Kennedy, 'Bishop Charles Venn Pilcher and the Christian Poetry of Medieval Iceland', in *Samtíðarsögur: The Contemporary Sagas, The Ninth International Saga Conference, Akureyri, 31.7–6.8.1994, Preprints* (Akureyri, 1994), p. 456.

'baptize' the Eddaic and skaldic poetic traditions respectively, creating a Christian poetry which absorbs elements of what was good in the older pre-Christian verse. For an Evangelical clergyman, this kind of attitude to spiritual history thus allowed him to celebrate works he found appealing and by implication to assert a continuity in contemporary religious life of those values he so admired. *Liknarbraut* and *Pislargrátr* are impressive examples of that Christian poetry, but both also foreshadow in Pilcher's view the finer treatment of their common subject, Christ's Passion, in Hallgrímur's *Passion Hymns*. Hallgrímur, a fellow clergyman and fellow Protestant, was clearly a man whose life and work strongly attracted Pilcher: apart from translating extensively from Hallgrímur's poetry over more than 40 years and into the last years of his own life, he regarded his 1921 journey to Iceland as primarily a pilgrimage to Saurbær in Hvalfjarðarströnd, the then somewhat inaccessible area where Hallgrímur had spent his last years.<sup>50</sup>

In a 1923 account of Hallgrímur's life and work Pilcher vividly evokes the poet's death scene as he wished to imagine it. He dies a leper, in poverty and in squalor, but triumphant in Christian confidence.<sup>51</sup> The theme of triumph over adversity, and by means of adversity – the 'splendid pain' concept – seems to have appealed strongly to Pilcher: one notes its appearance in the essay on the Norse heroic ideal, and that four of the scenes in the 1936 pageant are devoted to martyr bishops (to whose number might be added Jón Arason, an extended account of whose devout end Pilcher included in the introduction to his translation of *Pislargrátr*).<sup>52</sup> *Pislargrátr* and *Liknarbraut* are both poems on the sufferings and death of Christ, in Christian doctrine the means by which sin was conquered and humanity saved from damnation. In *Sólarljóð* the vision of the hereafter is won through the pains of death, and while the theme may not receive the prominence Pilcher felt it deserves in *Lilja*, it is present: the poem 'is the agonized cry of a soul, conscious of guilt, fleeing to the Christ Who fought the great battle against the Fiend for the salvation of men, and Who conquered by giving up His own life'.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps significant also is Pilcher's allusion to the improbable legend that the author of *Lilja* won miraculous release from prison through his composition of the poem.

50 See Beck, *Útverðir íslenzkrar menningar*, p. 145.

51 *Icelandic Meditations on the Passion*, pp. 4–6.

52 'Two Icelandic Medieval Passion Poems', p. 48.

53 *Icelandic Christian Classics*, p. 19.

In presenting such ideas Pilcher was doubtless influenced by some of the major intellectual currents of his formative years in late Victorian England – particularly what is often referred to as ‘muscular Christianity’, though Charles Kingsley, the somewhat aggressively Evangelical clergyman and novelist, often regarded as the movement’s most eminent figure, rather disliked the term. In Kingsley’s 1850 novel *Alton Locke*, one finds the notion of primeval Teutonic energy surviving in England through the Middle Ages to be strengthened and enriched by the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation;<sup>54</sup> and when in 1865 Kingsley made his first public comments on muscular Christianity, he traced what was worthwhile in the concept back to the chivalry of the Middle Ages, suggesting that chivalry contained in it ‘the first germ of that Protestantism which conquered at the Reformation’ and united its followers in the conviction ‘that true religion did not crush, but strengthened and consecrated a valiant and noble manhood’.<sup>55</sup>

Perhaps some caution is needed in detecting extensive muscular Christian influences in Pilcher’s work on the Norse poetry. That following the true path as a disciple of Jesus Christ requires courage, strength, and a resolute acceptance of the sternest challenges is, of course, a persistent Christian theme with a firm foundation in the New Testament. But Pilcher, like the muscular Christians, seems to have been especially conscious of it. This may not fully explain why he was attracted to a small society on the verge of the medieval European world, or his choice of these four medieval Icelandic poems. But it does suggest why an Evangelical Protestant clergyman felt that the demanding task of producing English verse translations of them was worthwhile.

Graham Barwell  
English Studies Program  
University of Wollongong

John Kennedy  
School of Information Studies  
Charles Sturt University-Riverina

<sup>54</sup> See C. J. W-L Wee, ‘Christian Manliness and National Identity: The Problematic Construction of a ‘Racially Pure’ Nation’, in *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, ed. David E. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 73–74.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Kingsley, *David: Four Sermons Preached Before the University of Cambridge* (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1865), pp. 9–10. See also Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot*, pp. 142–43.